Arguing as a Theological Practice

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'Arguing'

Nicholas Adams, University of Edinburgh

To consider Christian theological practices of arguing is to consider everything else as well. It is to consider the community and its patterns of relations between persons; it is to consider philosophy and its patterns of rules for drawing inferences; it is to consider the formation of doctrine and the deliberative councils that produce and rethink it; it is to consider Christian ethics and the unending sphere of contention in which it is located; it is to consider the Bible and the perennial disagreements over its interpretation; it is to consider the university which is a house for argumentation; it is to consider the media and the challenges which radio, television and the internet pose to practices of argumentation.

As a bullet list, arguing relates to the following topics:

- Doctrine
- Christian Ethics
- Church History
- Philosophical Theology
- Biblical Interpretation
- Theology in the Media

That might seem daunting enough, for reader and writer alike. But it is in fact much worse. Arguing may, in fact, be pointless.

The potential pointlessness of arguing can be demonstrated in two ways. The first is to consider the contemporary Western context of much theology, and the expectations of public speech embodied in its public media. The second is to consider more narrowly the hopes and dreams of seventeenth century philosophers (who forged many of our philosophical rules for arguing) and to note how these hopes and dreams evaporated in a dramatic way in the twentieth century. (They did not evaporate for everyone, in the same way, however, and this produces a kind of double life for arguing in theology, as I will show.)

Opinion's Triumph Over Truth

First, some observations about the world around us. Those reading this volume live in an environment dominated by the internet and to a lesser extent by television and the press. Opinion is more powerful than truth, and the most powerful thing one can be is an opinion-former. What one might call 'argumentative time' has changed as its media have changed. What is possible in a long written piece (for example, Augustine's *City of God*) is not possible in a radio interview, in a blog, or in the 140 character limit of a Twitter posting.

Understanding the media of argumentation is complex, not least because what people say (for instance about the importance of truth) often seems to be contradicted by what people do (for instance spending more time and money managing perceptions than pursuing truth). The existence of communication departments, of public relations firms or even just of advertising shows that the art of rhetoric is as significant now as it was in Augustine's time (Augustine originally trained as a rhetorician). Now, as then, these practices of opinion-shaping are accompanied by another tendency: the quest for truth. This quest – dominated in the popular imagination by natural science (and this domination is a big problem for theology, which is not a natural science) – is marked by doubt about popular conceptions (which often turn out to be wrong), by the formulation of hypotheses (which need to be tested), and by results (that are published and evaluated by a community of inquiry). This quest for truth appears in a multitude of guises in modern society, from scholarly journals, to investigative journalism, to websites which test consumer products and report on their performance. It remains the case, now as in former times, that the key to influence is how readily one's views are received (and perhaps understood) and not the depth of one's investigation or the subtlety of one's argument. The best advice one can give to young theologians who want to get noticed is, 'give it a good title, fill it with strong contrasts and submit it to a journal with a big circulation'. The quest for truth is not much of a quest unless it is accompanied (with apologies to Augustine) by the *libido opinionem figurandi* – the desire to shape opinion.

It is often said in politics: 'If you are explaining you are losing'. This remarkably lucid *bon mot* contains within it a wealth of wisdom about arguing. It captures the insight that it is vital to take and hold the initiative in any debate. It strongly implies that you should force your opponent to explain his or her views. It offers a rationale for the terse advice (allegedly by the great Oxford theologian Benjamin Jowett) 'never explain, never apologise'. It casts light on why most scholars are not successful in their own lifetimes, and why they are especially unsuccessful in the world of politics: scholarship is a world of explanation. It also explains why the best television drama has very little direct exposition, or why such exposition (if necessary) is often embedded in dramatic action such as a blazing row or pillow talk. The art of persuasion is, to a significant extent, the art of *not* explaining.

A final observation about the world around us concerns denominations and religious traditions. The Christian tradition is a fractured tradition. The East-West Schism of 1054 divided Christendom into Greek and Latin traditions. The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century divided the Latin tradition into Catholic and Protestant traditions. The Clarendon Code in England in the early 1660s formally identified Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Quakers as 'non-conformists' and excluded them from public office. And so on. There is a dour Scottish saying, tinged with melancholy: 'only rotten wood doesn't split'. The separations of the churches have from time to time been accompanied by attempts to move closer together. Some have been bi-lateral, such as the Anglican—Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), which was set up in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Others have been multi-lateral, such as the World Council of

Churches (established in 1948), which includes nearly all the major denominations with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church. Listing the different denominations of Christianity would take a long paragraph. Listing the bodies formed for their collaboration would be many times longer. Another phenomenon accompanies the fact of fissure within the 'one holy catholic and apostolic church' as the Nicene Creed of 325 (itself an agent of fissure: the Council of Nicea excluded the Arians) puts it. There are many non-Christian religious traditions with whom Christianity has engaged in various ways, in various countries, at various times. The most important of these, historically, are Judaism and Islam. Christianity grew up at the same time as rabbinic Judaism (the Mishnah dates to about 200 CE, making it roughly contemporary with the works of Ireneus, Clement and Origen), and the two traditions often defined themselves in opposition to each other. Islam grew up in the seventh century CE, and its major intellectual developments in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries had a massive impact on the great Christian theologians of the thirteenth. Al Farabi, Ibn Sina (also known as Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (also known as Averroes) produced a body of knowledge which wove Aristotelian philosophy into its theology in a way that strongly shaped and influenced the theological development of Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham. This article could with profit be devoted entirely to the arguing that went on between the Muslims and the Christians (not to mention the giant contribution of the Jewish Aristotelian philosopher Maimonides in the same period), or to the Dominicans and Franciscans. It won't. But it is important to note that the Christian theology is fractured, and is constantly produced in relation to other religious traditions, and a lot of arguing takes place because of that. These conclude my brief remarks about the world around us.

Philosophy Without Authorities

Second, we should consider the hopes and dreams of the seventeenth century. These can usefully be placed in a wider context. There have perhaps been five major developments in the practices of Christian arguing. This is not a generally accepted division, and it is offered here as a provisional scheme. These developments are:

- Patristic Councils
- Medieval Aristotelianism
- The Protestant Reformation
- The Rise of Modern Philosophy
- The Post-Modern Turn

A more historically oriented discussion could with profit devote its discussion entirely to reporting on the differences in the theological practices of arguing displayed in these five periods. Our interest is in the fourth period – the seventeenth century – because of its connection with the possible pointlessness of arguing.

The significant philosophers of the seventeenth century, for our purposes, are Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. They produced their philosophies in the wake of the Thirty Years War (1616-1648), a period in which the disagreements produced in the Protestant Reformation a century before became more intense and more violent. Descartes and his contemporaries saw that practices of arguing among Christians followed denominational lines. To say that Catholics and Protestants were unconvinced by each other's arguments would be an understatement. This situation called for a proper diagnosis. Descartes' analysis was that the problems lay in philosophical method. The methods of what we now call 'Scholastic Aristotelianism' (a generalisation which covers a long period from 1200-1650) were judged to be in disrepair and unsuitable for producing reasoned debate. There are many elements to this. The main problem, for Descartes, was the fundamental role played by appeal to authorities. If one reads Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* or Scotus' *Ordinatio*, one sees very quickly that the structure depends on a kind of collision between authorities (e.g. between Aristotle and scripture) and then an adjudication by the theological reasoner. The structure of arguing by the Scholastic Aristotelians was a confrontation of respected authorities, and a reasoning through of the issues in the light of this confrontation. That method was generative and successful for hundreds of years. Descartes judged it to be defective because of a major post-Reformation development: different denominations appealed to different authorities. Scholastic Aristotelianism depended on appeal to the same authorities, and produced disagreements on how to interpret them or adjudicate their differences. Once disputes arose over which authorities one might appeal to, that method became a problem. The scholastic method took for granted who the authorities were. It could not decide which authorities counted as authorities.

Descartes produced a philosophical method which did not appeal to authorities, and in doing so he produced what we now understand as modern philosophy. Ridding philosophy of appeal to authorities was a big project. The main challenge was to produce a method which tackled the problem of what an argument takes for granted, and what it aims to decide. Every argument takes certain things for granted, and places other things in doubt. Descartes produced a new method for handling these different things. The most precious quality of this method, for Descartes, was clarity. There should be clarity about an argument's basic terms: they must be clearly defined. There should be clarity about what an argument takes for granted: its premises (or 'axioms') must be clearly stated. There should be clarity about an argument's reasoning: its inferences must be demonstrated in the same water-tight way as geometrical proofs. One of the most elegant products of this method, which displays its clarity in an exemplary fashion, is Spinoza's *Ethics*, which proceeds exactly in this way, with a presentation of definitions, axioms and geometrical proofs. The main structure of a philosophical argument, after Descartes, is a pattern of axioms and hypotheses. Axioms articulate what is taken for granted; hypotheses formulate what is placed in doubt, and what is tested. The refinement of this method by Spinoza and Leibniz laid the pattern for much modern philosophy up to our own day. It did not only shape philosophy: the pattern of testing hypotheses in natural science is also a child of this

way of thinking. Newtonian mechanics, for example, does not proceed by appeal to authorities (as Renaissance investigation had, for example), but tests hypotheses.

The so-called debate between science and religion, or science and theology, is a good example of the practice of arguing. This debate has become rather complex in recent years and includes such questions as whether God exists, how the world is to be explained, whether evolutionary theory is in competition with the doctrine of creation, and so forth. One fruitful way to approach this debate, which also has the surprising effect of not getting directly involved in it, is to see it the way Descartes saw Scholastic Aristotelianism. Theology proceeds by appeal to authorities. Science proceeds by the construction and testing of hypotheses. This is a gross over-simplification, but it is not false. (It is an over-simplification in part because the various genres of public writing by scientists are often not natural science, and the mass-readership responses to them by theologians are often not theology.) Scientific objections to theology often rest on a refusal to acknowledge theology's authorities. Theological replies often point out that this is a strange objection, given that the unfolding of a tradition (and the settling of debates within it) is an enterprise rather different from the formation and testing of hypotheses. Darwin's *Origin of Species* is not an authority for biologists in the way that *Genesis* is an authority for theologians. Not noticing this leads to a variety of confusions.

Descartes and his immediate successors were impressed with the power that this new method gave to the practices of arguing, including theological arguing. Proofs for the existence of God became more refined, and many of the classical arguments (e.g. Anselm's so-called 'ontological argument' of 1077, or Aquinas' 'five ways' arguments of c.1265 – which include the so-called 'cosmological argument') were reworked by Descartes and Leibniz, using the new technology afforded by the geometrical method. The turn away from authorities and towards the geometrical relation of axioms to hypotheses in philosophy in the seventeenth century led, in time, to immense confidence in practices of arguing during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century in Britain, France and Germany. Theological practices of argumentation, which focused on authorities, were supplemented (and in some cases superseded) by practices of geometrical argumentation, which focused on axioms and hypotheses. What we now call 'philosophy of religion' is to a significant extent the product of this supplementation and supersession.

This confidence came under sustained assault by Nietzsche, especially in his late works of 1886-88. Nietzsche argued forcefully that what is dressed up by theology and science alike as argument is a masked exercise of power and a means of social control. Claims about 'truth' are, he argued, actually bids to take or maintain control. Nietzsche's arguments followed those of Marx who, in 1845, famously referred to the arguments of those in power as 'die ganze alte Scheiße' [all the old crap]. Together they prompted a revolution in thinking about the relation of power and argument, and initiated an historically unstoppable movement towards mistrust in argumentation, especially the argumentation of those who

control material, economic or political means. Our current cultural situation is a product of the distrust articulated by Marx and Nietzsche.

The theologian John Milbank urged (argued?) almost exactly 100 years after Nietzsche's rejection of argumentation that theology cannot (and should not try to) argue against its opponents. This is, he suggested, because the bases of all arguments are (as many philosophers in the late twentieth century claimed) insecure and 'baseless'. Instead of trying to argue, on the basis of agreed premisses, there can only be a competition between different stories, whose grounds are always baseless. The theological task is not to defeat by argument, but to 'out-narrate' other stories. Theological accounts, and those of its rivals, are alike baseless.[1]

It is for these reasons, or arguments or perhaps merely opinions, that arguing might well be pointless. The hopes and dreams for argumentation held in the seventeenth century produced a powerful intellectual technology for handling axioms and hypotheses according to a geometrical method. Two factors spoiled these dreams for theology. First, theology rightly proceeds by appeal to traditions. If it does not, it is not theology. Second, the axioms of any chain of theological reasoning are (from a Cartesian point of view) baseless. This sounds drastic, and a bad thing for theology. But it is swiftly demonstrated, and is vital to any theology that is alive and healthy. Any axiom of theological reasoning can be questioned, and none can be secured against criticism. It is axiomatic for most schools of theology that the Bible is authoritative, that Jesus is Lord, that God is triune. Each of these axioms rests on an implicit appeal to authority, whether of the Church, of tradition, of memory, or the Holy Spirit. To think theologically is to value the Church, and tradition, and memory and – in the case of the Holy Spirit – to acknowledge its divinity. Any rejection of these axiomatic claims as baseless cannot be countered by argument. The person who says, 'The Bible is not authoritative *for me*' does not stand in need of correction by argument. What they say is almost certainly true. The person who says, 'The Bible is not authoritative *per se*' is just confused. To be an authority is always to be an authority for someone. Not to be an authority is always not to be an authority for someone (or anyone).

The geometrical method of testing hypotheses on the basis of axioms would only be a secure basis for argumentation if the axioms themselves were a secure basis. As Leibniz so brilliantly observed, any chain of reasoning that contains a hypothesis is hypothetical all the way down. The only axioms that cannot be converted into hypotheses are self-evident ones, or analytically true ones. Theological axioms are not of this kind. It is true that in the period of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century attempts were made by philosophers to find a 'ground' of philosophy. These attempts failed. Arguably the greatest work on the philosophy of religion, Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* of the 1820s, proceeded on the basis of what people actually take to be true in their religious lives;

[1] John Milbank *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990)

it did not attempt (and explicitly refused to attempt) to prove its truth.[2] Anyone who accepts the failure to identify secure grounds is, in some sense, a post-modern thinker – although there are many incompatible varieties of such post-modern thinking.

It is obvious from even a cursory investigation of thinking and arguing in contemporary Western cultures that we are a mixture of modern and post-modern thinking. I do not mean that some of us are modern and some of us are post-modern. I mean that we are all both, to greater or lesser extents. Out and out rationalists, who think that the bases of our thinking can be secured against criticism, were once common in the eighteenth century but are now exceedingly rare. Radically post-modern thinkers, who reject any notion of truth, were rather common in the the later twentieth century, but they too are rather rare these days. Ours are times of ecological crisis, financial collapse, and widespread flood and famine. It is a curious and despicable person who shrugs his shoulders in the face of others' desperate suffering, and says that we can't be sure of anything. We can be sure that the gap between rich and poor is widening in the North, and that thousands of children are dying of starvation in the South. Suffering is real.

To engage in the Christian practice of arguing is to notice and respond to signs of others' suffering. If the Christian practice of arguing is in the service of those who address suffering, then it is clearly not pointless. To deny this is not clever and post-modern, but stupid and decadent. It is not even new. In Marx's words, it is the same old crap, which oppresses the poor and the weak. From this point onwards, this essay will outline an alternative to the geometrical method of the first modern philosophers, as an aid to responding to suffering. It has taken a while to get to this point. This is because of what I take to be a widespread suspicion about arguing, whether on Marxian, Nietzschean or post-modern grounds. To an extent one can properly share these suspicions, and it is important to traverse this ground, even in the brief way this essay has done so far. But at a certain point, enough is enough, and it is time to inquire into what good arguing is. Suffering is real. It calls for response.

Suffering and Problem-Solving

Arguing has multiple purposes which are not reducible to each other. At its most basic, arguing is a form of problem-solving and, as I have already suggested, the most fundamental problem is that of suffering. Problems like suffering do not primarily require explanation. They call for transformation. The only reason one might wish to understand suffering is in order to lessen it. Even if it defies understanding, the imperative to address it remains. What reasons are there for thinking one should address another's suffering? If one has to ask this question, it is probably best to stop reading now, because the one who asks this is in deep spiritual trouble; nothing that follows will help.

A taxonomy will be offered here, whose purpose is to classify different kinds of arguing. This will then provide a framework for a little more detail on each of these different kinds.

[2] GWF Hegel *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion Volume I* (ed. P Hodgson, Oxford: OUP, 2008)

The first distinction is between describing and arguing.

Describing, or ontology (to use Aristotelian language) or world-disclosure (to use Heidegger's wonderful phrase), is about saying what kind of world is before us. It is the use of existing categories, the transformation of inadequate categories, and the formation of new categories. To describe is to say what there is. A good deal of theology is description, is ontology, is world-disclosure. The use of words like 'creation', 'grace', 'sin' and 'redemption' describes the kinds of things there are in the world, and is already to say what we should do about them, in the light of what God has done and is doing about them. Such description is 'practical ontology', if you like: they are descriptions to live by. The being of creation, grace, sin and redemption calls for the action of prayer, praise, repentance and gratitude. Description and ethics (or 'is' and 'ought') are utterly entangled. There have been philosophers who denied this. They were wrong. Description, for Christians, is also bound up with petition: with asking. Most services of worship are a complex mixture of describing, asking, and performing the responses to such description and petition. Milbank's combative image of 'out-narrating' one's opponents is essentially a descriptive, ontological, world-disclosive approach.

Arguing, or logic, or problem-solving, is about correcting mistakes, overcoming obstacles to action, trying to live together, forming the minds of the young, and a whole range of other related activities. It is about a lot of different, but often related, forms of articulate action. Description may reveal that we should act. Arguing may be needed to refine and correct such description, to draw inferences correctly, and to determine what form that action should take.

The second set of distinctions lie within the notion of arguing.

These can be named and divided in a number of ways. I offer here three sets of three, which in slightly different ways articulate the same tripartite division:

- Demonstrative, grammatical, reparative
- Proof, clarification, transformation
- Agreement, understanding, healing

There may be other forms of arguing, but these three capture the most important forms that are encountered in theological argumentation. Each set of three is a version of the same basic insight.

By demonstrative argumentation I mean the attempt to prove something, or the attempt to reach agreement with someone else. There are various forms that demonstrative argumentation might take. The classic *quaestio* approach of the high middle ages, such as one finds in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* or in Scotus' *Ordinatio*, is to take a question (e.g. 'Whether the existence of God can be proven'), marshal arguments for and against, and then to reason through the competing possibilities to reach a conclusion. It is the model for

much contemporary philosophical theology. The later geometrical method, favoured by Spinoza in his *Ethics*, begins with definitions, presents axioms, and proceeds to draw inferences. It is the model for contemporary formal logic. The much later approach of 'immanent critique', elaborated by Adorno in the twentieth century, considers a cluster of arguments made by a rival, and proceeds to show how they break down when their internal inconsistencies or contradictions are identified. This method attempts as far as possible not to introduce axioms or considerations that are foreign to the arguments that are placed in question. Instead, the critique is powered by showing that the arguments fail on their own ground and in their own terms. Finally, it is worth mentioning 'deconstruction'. This is not so much a formal and explicit method of demonstrative argumentation, as a vague term covering a variety of methods of criticism refined by Foucault and Derrida. References to deconstructive argument normally mean a process of taking a cluster of arguments and revealing their dependence on a set of assumptions which are not explicitly articulated in those arguments, and then calling those assumptions into question or explicitly rejecting them, or showing that certain assumptions reflect the interests and power of a particular sector in society - especially in cases where the arguments are allegedly 'rational' and present themselves as 'universally' persuasive. To 'deconstruct' an argument is to undermine its apparent neutrality or impartiality. The most arresting examples of deconstructive argument are those which show that the assumptions in play in 'rational' discussion actually express unexamined normative commitments whose effect is to exclude significant groups from full participation in discussion. Much feminist argument has rightly exposed the ways in which certain kinds of rational argument implicitly refuse to take the body seriously as a source of reasons or of meanings. An argument which says, 'a physical bond between persons cannot be a source of reasons which guide their actions' exemplifies this very clearly, and stands in need of correction.

By grammatical argumentation I mean the attempt to clarify something, or to reach understanding with someone else about something's meaning. This mode of argumentation is not so much concerned to prove something, as to make sense of it. It might well result in forms of agreement, but its principal orientation is understanding rather than agreement. There are various forms which grammatical argument might take. Augustine's formula 'I believe that I might understand', refined in Anselm's formula that his *Proslogion* project is 'faith seeking understanding', is a classic version. The aim of argumentation here is to deepen understanding of what we, or you, believe. In demonstrative argumentation the aim is to believe something, we might say. In grammatical argumentation we (or you) already believe something, but we seek deeper understanding of what that means. The later developments of Leibniz display aspects of this grammatical mode of argumentation, as in his 'Principles of Nature and Grace, according to Reason', which examines basic theological topics through the lens of recent models of argumentation. This can also be seen in forms of (especially Roman Catholic) theology in the later twentieth century in the wake of

Wittgenstein's philosophy, which attempt explicitly 'grammatical' investigations of theological speech and action, such as Nicholas Lash's *Believing Three Ways in One God*'.[3]

It is not always obvious whether an argument is demonstrative or grammatical. There has been considerable debate by scholars concerning Anselm's so-called 'ontological argument' and Aquinas' 'five ways' arguments. Anselm has been taken, by Barth, and Aquinas has been taken, by Cornelius Ernst, to be engaged in grammatical endeavours: they do not aim to prove the existence of God so much as to clarify what it means to assert God's existence.[4] The contrary view, however, has been more common. Brian Davies has offered a strong contrary reading of Anselm which emphasises his demonstrative ambitions, and Denys Turner has contradicted Ernst's reading of Aquinas' five ways, in an insistence that Aquinas is actually trying to prove something. These disagreements are difficult to adjudicate, as the distinction between demonstrative and grammatical argument is a relatively recent development, and in any case it is quite possible that a particular argument might display features of both kinds of approach.[5]

By reparative argument I mean the attempt to transform debate, and to heal wounds in a tradition's ways of thinking and acting. This kind of argumentation is not common, and its arguments are generally doomed to be a minority voice in a tradition for a long time, until they are accepted by later generations. This is because reparative arguments are very difficult to understand. They are difficult to understand because they offer an alternative way of viewing a problem, and this alternative is radically unfamiliar to its readers who – if they understand and accept it – will find their own thinking and acting transformed by it. Reparative reasoning generally proceeds by rethinking the basic categories in play, in a fundamental way. There are many examples. Aquinas' rethinking of Augustinian theology in the light of categories from Aristotelian philosophy; Descartes' rethinking of Scholastic Aristotelianism in the light of categories from geometry; Kant's rethinking of rationalism and empiricism in the light of new 'transcendental' categories; Hegel's rethinking of the idea of conceptuality in the light of historical categories; Peirce's rethinking of the tasks of philosophy in the light of what he calls 'thirdness'; Collingwood's rethinking of the tasks of philosophy in the light of what he calls 'the logic of question and answer'; Wittgenstein's rethinking of the tasks of philosophy in the light of grammatical categories. In each case, radical proposals are put forward, in the face of traditions that are perceived to be

[3] Nicholas Lash *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press: 1993)

[4] Karl Barth *Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme* (London: Pickwick, 1975); Cornelius Ernst 'Metaphor and Sacra Doctrina' in *Multiple Echo: Explorations in Theology* (ed. F Kerr and T Radcliffe, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), pp.57-75

[5] Brian Davies 'Anselm and the Ontological Argument' in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (ed. B Davies and B Leftow, Cambridge: CUP, 2004) pp. 157-178; Denys Turner *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp.193-225

becoming stagnant and repetitive. In many cases, the trigger for repair is the insight that current argumentative options rest upon false oppositions. Rather than make a case for one side of such an opposition, as everyone else currently is, the philosopher offers an account in which the source of the false opposition is repaired, and a quite different settlement appears.

Some classic examples may help explain this unfamiliar taxonomy. Aquinas' account of analogical speech about God confronted a false opposition between univocal and equivocal speech. He drew on Aristotle's notion of 'paronymous' speech in *Categories* in his (Aquinas') account of analogy, which cannot be reduced to one or other of the false alternatives. Descartes' response to the tribal oppositions of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' logics of argumentation was to produce an alternative logic, based on geometry, which could not be reduced to either of the false alternatives, and which was intended to repair the failure of traditions to be able to argue meaningfully. Hegel's account of 'the concept' is a repair of the false opposition in philosophy between 'being' and 'thinking'. His account of 'Spirit' is a repair of the false opposition between individual and community, and of what he sees (very controversially) as the false opposition between God and humanity (which is a consequence, he thinks, of the false opposition between 'being' and 'thinking'). Descartes' and Hegel's reparative argumentation are interesting cases, compared with those of Aquinas and Wittgenstein. Whereas the projects of Aquinas and Wittgenstein have proven generative and welcome, Descartes is largely understood in theology to have made the original problem worse: his remedies caused more damage than they healed. Hegel's proposal, on the other hand, have a strange double life. They are extremely well-known (his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a classic text in the history of philosophy) but are a source of almost universal puzzlement. This is because much of the philosophical tradition continues to presuppose an opposition between 'being' and 'thinking'. There are objects, 'out there' and there is my thinking, 'in here'. The philosophical task is to show how they are related. Hegel thinks this is wrong-headed. To contemplate objects is to contemplate thinking, and to contemplate thinking is to contemplate objects. Hegel's proposal to overcome what he sees as the false opposition between God and humanity is greeted by almost universal dismay by theologians. This is because he is taken to be saying either that God is really a way of talking about human self-consciousness, or that 'humanity' is really a way of talking about God's self-consciousness. Hegel himself would be puzzled by this, because such an interpretation is still locked in a false opposition between God and humanity! This is not the place to explore these fascinating issues.[6] It will suffice to say two things: first, Hegel is still in his doom, as a minority voice. Second, this is likely to continue until his account of Anselm's ontological argument finds its way into the textbooks. Hegel takes Anselm to be engaged neither in demonstrative nor in grammatical argumentation. He argues that Anselm's account is (in my terms) 'reparative'. Anselm's 'concept' of God overcomes the false opposition between 'thinking God' and 'God's being'. Anselm's account of God is a

[6] See Nicholas Adams *The Eclipse of Grace: Divine and Human Action in Hegel* (Oxford: Blackwell-Wiley, 2013)

performance in which being and thinking are harmoniously and indivisibly one. To a philosophical tradition stuck (as Hegel would see it) in the false opposition of thinking and being, this account of Anselm is just puzzling and bizarre.[7]

Some more modern examples of reparative argumentation may offer further illumination. One of the areas where arguing is obviously central to the practice of theology is Christian ethics, which is the discipline devoted to exploring descriptions to live by, or more narrowly to determining how Christians should act. It is a relatively recent development (around two hundred years old) to distinguish different disciplines within theology, such as Church history, the study of the Bible, the study of Doctrine and the study of Christian ethics. For most of Christian history theology encompasses all of these, and earlier theologians would probably not have considered them distinct disciplines. The development of the modern university in Germany produced a transformation in the organisation of different 'faculties'. The existence of Christian ethics, as a distinct discipline, is the product of this administrative settlement.[8] One of the unforeseen effects of this settlement was the development of the idea that there is such a thing as 'ethics', which enquires into topics such as freedom, punishment, virtue, duty, responsibility, rights, and so on. In the face of this discipline, Christian ethics becomes a sub-discipline within ethics, as well as a sub-discipline within theology. It becomes possible to conceive of Christian ethics as a branch of theological argumentation, in which case it is about the distinctively 'ethical' dimension of doctrinal, historical and biblical scholarship. It also becomes possible to conceive of Christian ethics as a branch of ethics, in which case it is about distinctively 'Christian' approaches to questions of freedom, punishment, virtue, duty, responsibility, rights and so forth. In the first case the emphasis is on what to *do*. In the second, the emphasis is on *what* to do. There have been attempts to refuse this division of intellectual labour, as in Barth's insistence that 'ethics is dogmatics'.[9] A more radical – and reparative – response can be seen in the work of three contemporary figures: Stanley Hauerwas, Oliver O'Donovan and John Milbank. These thinkers have different projects, with different concerns, but they share a couple of over-riding concerns. The first is that to fight battles about ethics is simultaneously to fight battles about the discipline of Christian ethics. The second is related. To investigate possible courses of action, one has at the same time to investigate the basic categories in which possible courses of action are described. Descriptions often express implicit commitments to action (they contain 'descriptions to live by'), and that means that to argue about action is also to argue about description. It is for these reasons that they say some odd-looking and apparently rather extreme things. Hauerwas insists that 'justice' is a bad idea for Christians; O'Donovan calls into question the notion that a society can be 'pluralist';

[7] See Nicholas Adams 'Faith and Reason' in *The Impact of Idealism Volume 4: Religion* (ed. N Adams, Cambridge: CUP, 2013, forthcoming)

[8] See FDE Schleiermacher *Brief Outline of Theology As a Field of Study* (tr. T Tice, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011)

[9] Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* II.2 (ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), p. 518

Milbank insists that to think theologically is to operate with a rival ontology that stands in conscious opposition to secularist ontologies.[10] The effects of these forms of argument are extreme: indeed they are radical. But the basic insight that they embody is probably one that their fiercest opponents would not contest: to investigate phenomena is also to investigate the categories for describing phenomena. These forms of argumentation are reparative, in my scheme, because they are deeper than merely demonstrative or grammatical. They aim to do more than merely argue for various courses of action in the world, more than merely seek to understand forms of Christian action. They see practices of Christian self-understanding as damaged, and they aim to heal them.

A lot of ground has been traversed quickly. We have confronted the problem posed by a world oriented to 'opinion' rather than 'truth' (Plato's problem is still with us.) We have confronted the failed aspirations of the seventeenth century: there is no pure logic that can replace appeals to authorities, and some theologians even think that because we appeal to authorities, and operate with rival ontologies, we should talk more of 'narrative' than 'argument'. We have considered a taxonomy of argumentation which seeks to distinguish different argumentative interests and strategies.

It remains for us to confront the other major problem outlined in the introduction: the fact that traditions are fractured both externally (there are different religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and many others) and internally (within Christianity there are as many denominations as there are world religions).

Fractured Traditions

At one level, we already have a way of considering this. Theological argumentation, unlike geometry, involves appealing to authorities like the Bible and the great theologians of the tradition. We can begin by noticing, as Descartes noticed, that different traditions appeal to different authorities, and that this has a fundamental effect on how they argue with each other. If you and I are arguing, and my case rests on appeal to texts and figures who are not authoritative for you, it is probably wise for us to acknowledge this.[11] What next?

At this point, and on this question, there are currently two rival proposals. The first is associated with figures like Rawls and Habermas and their students. They disagree on many of the details, but they agree on at least one thing: there must be 'public reasons' to which appeal can be made. The main quality displayed by public reasons is that they do not rely on appeals to particular traditions and their authorities. Public reasons need to appeal to criteria that are shared. To use language from the late eighteenth century, they need to be

[10] Stanley Hauerwas *After Christendom?: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999); Oliver O'Donovan 'Reflections on Pluralism' in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 2008, pp.54-66; Milbank *Theology and Social Theory*

[11] See Nicholas Adams 'Long-Term Disagreement: Philosophical Models in Scriptural Reasoning and Receptive Ecumenism' in *Modern Theology* 2013, forthcoming

'universal'. The philosophical task is thus energetically to seek the universal or at least the shared, and produce a public sphere or square in which only public reasons count.[12] The second proposal is widely distributed across a range of thinkers in a variety of traditions. They too disagree on many of the details, but again they agree on at least one thing: any appeal that will 'count' for a member of a particular tradition will refer to what is genuinely (and perhaps peculiarly) authoritative in that tradition. If there are 'public reasons' these will be the making public of reasons that are at home in particular traditions.[13] This debate often reproduces many of the Cartesian problems we have already considered, and sets up a dubious (probably false) opposition between 'reason' and 'tradition'. Any attempt to resolve this opposition on the side of 'reason' (Rawls, Habermas and others) or to resolve this on the side of 'tradition' (their opponents) brings the argument to an abrupt impasse.

False oppositions call for reparative argument, rather than demonstrative or grammatical approaches. There are reparative dimensions to both sides of the 'public reasons' argument. Habermas has made what he sees as significant concessions to traditions by focusing on what is shared, rather than what is universal. Some advocates of traditions investigate the basic categories in play in these debates at the same time as they investigate the social phenomena that produce the apparent crisis in the spheres of political and legal judgement. Governments and courts have to produce laws and judgements whose authority citizens from different traditions can and must acknowledge. Investigating shared ground and investigating the basic categories in which the discussion is couched is valuable work.

Further reparative moves are possible. Two in particular are worth considering for those seeking to learn how to engage in Christian arguing. The first is to repair the false opposition between traditions. It is a remarkable and unfortunate feature of the arguments of Rawls and Habermas that they think of traditions as simply different from each other, and they think of difference as a problem. This false opposition can be overcome by pointing out that traditions are often different from each other because of (rather than despite) their engagements with each other. Their self-understandings are often produced by a desire to differentiate themselves from others, and to see difference as a good thing. It is not true that Judaism, Christianity and Islam grew up separately and now, under modern conditions, find themselves living in the same cities in the same states, with a new and urgent need to relate to each other in the public sphere. This is nonsense. The traditions grew up in relation to each other, and partly define themselves according to that relation to each other. Those relations have often been painful, violent and unjust. This means that the search for shared ground is not a search for things that just happen to be shared. The traditions already share each other, one might say, and have the scars to prove it. Allied to

[12] See Nicholas Adams 'Interreligious Engagement in the Public Sphere' in *Understanding Inter-Religious Relations* (ed. D Pratt, Oxford: OUP, 2013, forthcoming)

[13] See Jeffrey Stout *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)

this is the unwarranted presupposition that traditions are stable, and that the task is to determine what features of these stable traditions can most fruitfully be brought together. This too is nonsense. Traditions change. Judaism was changed by Christianity, and then by Islam. Christianity was changed by Islam, and then by encounter with a whole range of traditions; it was changed by Judaism in a profound way in the twentieth century. Islam was changed by European modernity: fundamentalist Islam is a modern rejection of Islamic traditions, and its habits were probably learned from forms of Christian modernity that rejected Christian traditions. The traditions continue to change. That means that attempts to produce political and legal settlements will not only be a matter of bringing traditions together in the public square. It will also be a matter of those traditions adapting to life together in various ways, as one sees in the lives of Coptic Christians in Egypt, or Turkish Muslims in Germany, or European Jews in the USA.

The first reparative move is thus to see the traditions as already in relation to each other, and always adapting to changing circumstances. Traditions are neither separate from another, nor are they stable. Traditions are entangled and alive.

Comparative Logic

The second reparative move is to think not just about ontology but also logic. This sounds rather grand, but it is simple in conception. Traditions differ from each other in different ways. They may appeal to different authorities (the Talmud, the Church Fathers, the tradition of Fiqh). They may describe the world, themselves and each other in different categories (law and tradition, nature and grace, obedience and submission). These are ontological matters: they are differences at the level of considering what kinds of thing there are. Ontological differences call for ontological investigations. But there are also differences in logic. These are more resistant to investigation because the study of logic is highly specialised.

What is meant by 'logic'? A logic is a system of rules for drawing inferences. Less formally, a logic is a pattern of habits for coming to conclusions. To think is to make connections between things. A logic is an ordering of those connections according to rules. Those rules can be made explicit, as in the work of Aristotle and his many and varied successors. They can be further clarified through diagrams, as in the work of C.S. Peirce.[14] By and large they are left implicit, as in the work of most of the rest of us. Those trained in the analytical tradition often behave as if there is one logic, operative throughout history. This may be because modern analytical logic is immensely powerful, and it is possible to cast many arguments from the past or from different traditions, in its own terms. It is not true that there is one logic, however. There are many logics. To be a scholar of medieval philosophy is sometimes to be a comparative logician. A skilled comparative logician can often make an educated guess who the author of a classic text is, by noting the particular logics at work. Comparative logic is possible because there are different logics and they can be compared.

[14] See Peter Ochs *Peirce, Pragmatism and the Logic of Scripture* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998)

The logics of Aristotle, of Augustine, of Anselm, of Aquinas, of Spinoza, or Hegel are different from one another. Some of the earlier logics can be recast in the terms of the later logics. It is an interesting challenge to try the reverse procedure. There can be different logics within the same religious tradition. There are also different logics across different traditions. This can be difficult to see if one does not travel outside one's own cultural context or one's own discipline. Engineering in Beijing is much like engineering in Boston. Philosophy of religion in Munich is much like philosophy of religion in Cambridge. This is because engineers in Beijing may have been trained at MIT, and philosophers of religion in Cambridge may have been trained at Ludwig-Maximilian Universität in Munich. But legal reasoning in Al-Azhar in Cairo is radically different from legal reasoning in the Inner Temple in London. As soon as one shows an interest in history and geography, comparative logic is on the horizon, even if only in an elementary way.

The current debate about 'public reason' is not characterised by energetic investigations into comparative logic. It needs to be. This is unlikely in the near future because we are not training our theologians in comparative logic. We teach them doctrine, ethics, scripture, history, philosophy. If we teach them logic, it is analytic logic. This is certainly better than no logic at all. We do not teach them classical Aristotelian logic, or Scholastic Aristotelian logic. We most certainly do not teach them comparative logic in the period between 1100 and 1300, comparing the logics of different Jewish, Christian and Islamic masters. Were a university to create a masters programme in comparative logic, it is not obvious that it would be immediately over-subscribed. It might have enormous long-term benefits for religious traditions seeking to live together peaceably, however. The most important step, however, is to cease teaching philosophy as an 'option' in theology, and to make it compulsory.

It is possible nevertheless to pursue some worthwhile logical investigations, even if they fall short of the sophistication and power that comparative logic might offer. I want now to revisit the question of appeals to authorities, but to do so in a more formal way. The framework for this is a contrast between thinking in terms of twos and thinking in terms of threes.[15]

The easiest example is the meaning of words. We normally consider that words have meanings. This is a sensible approach. It is an example of thinking in terms of twos. The 'two' in question here is (1) words and (2) meanings. This is a respectable and worthwhile way of thinking. But suppose I pick a word like 'realist'. Suppose I say that Aquinas is a 'realist'. What does 'realist' mean? It could mean that Aquinas is not a naïve fantasist about the challenges posed by human sin. He is a 'realist' about what people are like. It could mean that Aquinas thinks that universals refer to beings in the world. He is not a

[15] See Peter Ochs "From Two to Three: To Know is also To Know the Context of Knowing," in Steven Kepnes and Basit Bilal Koshul, eds., *Scripture, Reason and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter: Studying the "Other," Understanding the "Self"* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 177-200.

'nominalist' about universals. We can continue to think in terms of twos. We can say words have multiple meanings. The two in question here is (1) words and (2) multiple meanings. Again, this is a respectable and worthwhile way of thinking. It is, after all, how we normally (and rightly) think.

But suppose we change the frame and notice that the reason words have multiple meanings is that words take their meanings from their contexts. We are now thinking in terms of threes. The three in question here is (1) words having (2) meanings in (3) contexts. We could even adopt an extreme pedagogical stance and say, 'words don't have meanings; words have meanings for people'. The three in question here is (1) words and their (2) meanings for (3) particular persons.

Once we acquire this new habit of thinking in threes, the question of authorities can be recast. Take the case of the Bible. We can say 'The Bible is authoritative'. That is to think in twos. We can also say 'The Bible is authoritative for Christians'. That is to think in threes. Twos and threes produce different questions. When thinking in twos, we can ask, 'is the Bible authoritative?' And that will invite a yes/no kind of answer. When thinking in threes, we can ask, 'who is the Bible authoritative for'? That will invite not a binary yes/no answer, but a triadic answer: 'the Bible is authoritative for Christians'.

Thinking in threes can produce a further level of sophistication. We can say, 'the Bible is authoritative for Christians but not for atheists'. This can be turned into a piece of formal logic:

A is B for X
A is not B for Y

In this case A is the Bible, B is authoritative, X is Christians and Y is atheists.

We can say, 'the Bible is meaningful for Christians but nonsense for atheists'

A is P for X
A is Q for Y

If this way of thinking becomes second nature, we can recast the relation of axioms and hypotheses that we considered in an earlier section. It is an axiom for Christians that Jesus is fully man and fully God. It is not an axiom for Muslims. For Muslims it is at best an hypothesis. Let us say that I am a Christian and you are a Muslim.

What is an axiom for me is an hypothesis for you.

This is a very sophisticated way of thinking. Let us take that example and think in terms of twos again. 'Is Jesus fully man and fully God'? This is a question which invites a binary yes/no answer. We can make it even more emphatic. 'Is it true that Jesus is fully man and fully God?'.

This question can be given binary answers. Yes it is true. No it is not true. To think in twos is to acknowledge that either it is true or it isn't true. This is a perfectly respectable and proper way to think. Clearly it is true or it isn't. It is nonsense to say 'It is true for me, but not true for you'. There is no 'for me' or 'for you' in matters of truth.

But the question can be given a three or triadic answer:

> 'I take it as an axiom that it is true. You take it as a hypothesis to be investigated'.

Or

> 'I take it as an axiom that it is true. You take it as an axiom that it is not true'.

Where the binary answer was focused on its truth, the triadic question is focused on how it is taken. It is important to notice that binary and triadic approaches are not in competition. We think in binary ways most of the time, and that is proper. But the triadic thinking changes both the question and the tone of the discussion. How does it change the question? In the binary case, there is opposition which will not be overcome. Yes it is true. No it is not true. There is an element of confrontation here. In the triadic case, there is difference which is acknowledged, in a non-confrontational way. It is also important to notice that the question of truth is not excluded in the triadic case. There is no suggestion that truth does not matter, or is relativised in any way. It remains firmly on the table in an explicit way.

What advantages does this have? Basically, it introduces a new set of questions and – crucially – new possibilities for investigation. In a world of binaries, our investigations will be into whether things are true or not. These are good investigations. We should undertake them seriously. In a world of triads, our investigations will be into how you and I understand things, as we attempt to discover how and on what we differ. These are also good investigations, and they are difficult to imagine when we think only in twos. In binary thinking we are curious about the world, and rightly so. In triadic thinking we are curious about each other, and this transforms our relationship to one another. This is a great good. It is not yet comparative logic, but it is on the right path.

If these remarks about axioms and hypotheses in relation to thirds is persuasive, they nonetheless need to be refined along at least one further axis. Axioms (or presuppositions or assumptions) are not best thought of as blocks of knowledge or chunks of propositional content. Just as it is common to observe that beliefs in Christian ethics are products of formation, of education and (in short) of a life, so it is vital to acknowledge that in logic such things as axioms and assumptions are condensed or sedimented forms of a community's history of engagements, debates and social settlements. Similarly the logics that bring these sedimented forms to life and put them to work are not best thought of as abstract rules that exist independently of those communities that follow them. Logics are (to quote Heidegger) paths through the wood. They are ways through terrain that have been worn smooth by use. To take an interest in logics is at the same time to confront that terrain and this is best

done by thinking about the histories that produced them, and the forms of social life that continue to sustain them.

This essay has been about arguing. It is worth asking what lessons can be learned in the light of the discussion outlined here. In the briefest terms, Christians can learn to raise the level of debate. Christians and others can learn to have higher quality disagreements. We can end with seven concrete proposals for Christian formation in relation to arguing.

1. Be prepared to argue when confronted with others' suffering. Suffering is the sign of a problem, and addressing problems will very likely require argument.

2. Be realistic about the dominance of opinion in our societies and vigorously pursue questions of truth. Learn how to make the most of modern mass media.

3. Acknowledge that many forms of argumentation depend on the insistence, stemming from the seventeenth century in France, that valid arguments should not appeal to authorities. Be explicit that Christian arguments do rest on appeals to authorities, including the Bible, your traditions, and (very often) the wisdom of the community's elders.

4. Distinguish between demonstrative, grammatical and reparative arguments.

5. When considering how traditions should interact in public, treat traditions as unstable, as already related to each other and as continually adapting to new circumstances.

6. Investigate ontologies.

7. Investigate logics.